1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Hait:SV3 Mirebl.is

114. It is interesting to speculate just why the life of the Haitian peasant, and, indeed, within the last decade, of the educated city dwellers, thus became a subject for lurid decription. In its most honest manifestation actual misunderstanding or naïveté has undoubtedly been the cause; or it may be inferred that certain of the pictures drawn have been dictaed by prejudice or by international political considerations. Finally, and within recent times most frequently, writers have seemed deliberately to distort and sensationalize their materials in order to attract to their work a desired notoriety.

The effect of this constant stress laid on the African cults in describing Haitian life has been not only to throw the entire picture badly out of focus, but to distract attention from the equally interesting phases of Haitian society which concern the everyday life of the people. Almost nowhere, aside from pre-Revolutionary eighteenth-century writings, can information be had about the workaday world. The rituals that accompany birth and death, the social and economic values that prevail, characteristic institutions such as the market or co-operative work-groups — one searches in vain for other than cursory mention of these in the later accounts. Even where a writer has included a discussion of such co-operative organization as the Société Congo on the Isle à Gonave, emphasis is almost exclusively laid on its picturesque ceremonialism. Mention, it is true, is at times made of happy, "child-like" (the favored adjective), normal Haitians in the few pages that recent books have devoted to daytime activities. But with the dusk the "booming drums" are made to sound and the mysteries are again called upon to divert the reader.

114 105 182 Yet how are these descriptions of a hysterical, paranoid folk, ridden with fear of the dark forces of magic and the anger of vindictive gods, to be reconciled with the picture of the Haitian as he is shown in the second section of this book — of a man going about his affairs in matter-of-fact fashion, tending his crops, buying and selling, carrying on his amorous

1: Herskovits E-4, 8 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

conquests, establishing and providing for his family? The answer is that such a reconciliation is unnecessary where religion takes its place beside other interests and activities and where, psychologically, the supernatural world is on the same plane as the natural one, having its dangers as nature presents dangers, but also offering its compensations as do other phases of existence.

Investigations of native life such as this one not only require generous financial support, but have need of the sympathetic understanding of those in a position to extend helpful practical aid and advice in the field. To the many persons and institutions whose co-operation made this study possible, it is a privilege to record here my appreciation. Initial support of the work and later appropriations for preparing the material for publication were had from the Social Science Research Councils of Columbia and Northwestern Universities; while a grant-in-aid from the American Council of Learned Societies permitted the recording of songs in the field; and another from the National Research Council allowed motion pictures of motor behavior to be taken — films from which a number of the accompanying illustrations have been derived. Concepts relating to the problem of the results of contact between peoples possessing different customs, habits, and beliefs — a principle objective in the long-term program of research on Negro cultures of which this work in Haiti constitutes but a part — were sharpened through the discussions I have been privileged to have with my associates on the Committee of Acculturation of the Social Science Research Council, Professors Ralph Linton, Robert Redfield, and Donald Young.

Official aid in Haiti could not have been more generously accorded. The sympathy of His Excellency President Stenio Vincent, and M. Jacques C. Antoine, chief of the presidential secretariat in 1934 and at present Secretary to the Legation

1: Herskovits E-4, 6 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3 Mirebalais

CHAPTER XV

SOME WIDER IMPLICATIONS

No student of Haitian institutions can elude a progressively sharpened awareness of the psychological conflict that is being waged within the frame of Haitian society. And though examples of the divergent forces which lie at the root of this conflict have been set forth in the preceding chapters, some of the more important of these may be recalled here.

In his social relationships the Haitian is constantly exposed to the demands of a code of morality which requires marriage to be monogamic. Yet the African tradition of polygyny, and the undoubtedly satisfactory arrangements of both an economic and a social nature that can be made under the terms of plural marriage, pull him toward this form. The case is even stronger in the field of religion, which in Haiti is not a thing remote from life, but an intimate part of existence. On the one hand, because of his inheritance of the *loa*, he must meet his obligations toward these ancestral gods of Africa who punish harshly those who fail them, so that he must either continue their traditional worship or learn to know the consequences of their anger. Yet on the other hand, the priest thunders his maledictions and threats of eternal damnation—in Mirebalais, at least, often in Créole, a language which the peasant can understand—against those of his flock, the vast majority

L: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

of whom are sincere practicing voduists as they are sincere practicing Catholics, who do not put an end to the worship of false gods.

The absence of graphic and plastic arts in Haitian culture, commented upon in a preceding chapter, must also be regarded as a case in point in laying bare the anatomy of this inner conflict of tradition, since it is important to recognize that the suppression of these forms of the prevalent African tradition would seem to have lost to the Haitian an important outlet for the resolution of inner tensions caused by pent-up drives. Even more revealing is the substitution of games of chance for those games of skill which in most African and New World Negro societies are played for their own sake alone—that is, for the prestige accruing to the skillful player. The strain that accompanies this play for stakes, often of no inconsiderable value in terms of the resources of the players, is patent to the most casual observer. The question here arises whether or not the craving for excitement of this kind may not in Haiti be traceable to the inhibition, under slavery, of some of the more gracious forms of African life which there make for social equilibrium. Might it not represent a kind of compensation for the thwarted psychic ease with which a culturally undisturbed people approach their own existence—a state of being which, in contrast, is quite lacking in Haiti?

A singularly illuminating comment upon these manifestations of instability in Haitian life has been made by Dr. J. C. Dorsainvil, who in drawing his conclusion called both upon his own medical training and on his experience of many years as a profound student of his own people. "It has perhaps been insufficiently remarked to what an astonishing degree the Haitian people live on their nerves."[1] As might be expected, he advances a number of possible explanations of the causes that underlie this state of "living on nerves." The wear and tear of life in the tropics is given as one reason; another is the excitement of the *vodun* dances with their frenzy of possession;

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

154 rites for him, despite his strict Catholic upbringing. His vacillation between the desire to understand and worship the gods of his ancestors and his utter remorse after he had done this illustrates one way in which conflicts in a cultural setting can affect the outward responses and unsettle the inner adjustment of the individual who is exposed to such a situation. From a broader point of view, such an analysis of Haitian psychology suggests a more realistic understanding of the individuals in other cultures who have likewise fallen heir to conflicting traditions.

154 182 However revealing this type of analysis of the springs of Haitian behavior may prove, it will be adding only a fragment of esoteric information unless it, like all other aspects of the investigation of this single society and its mode of life, is pointed toward an understanding of the larger problems of the relation between man and his culture. For just as a study of the effect of the dual character of Haitian behavior upon the personality of the Haitians is important in throwing light on the study of the relationship between culture and personality in general, so the study of Haitian institutions may hold equal significance when questions are raised about the less subjective aspects of human civilization — that is, when attempts are made to understand what may be termed the dynamics of culture.

197 Most important in this connection is the demonstration made in this book how cultures in contact influence each other. This would seem self-evident but for the fact that very generally when such a proposition has been stated, it rarely enters into the actual studies of primitive cultures in contact with European civilizations without being neutralized by a counter-assumption that the force of European achievement overwhelms peoples with a differing cultural heritage. As will be seen, the failure to recognize this fact of the reciprocal effects of cultural contacts has entered to a very significant degree into the determination of basic atti-

L: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
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179 178 suggests that generalizations as to the relative pliability of any specific phases of a culture under exposure to another are premature.

562 178 Are women more conservative than men in respect to cultural change? The appropriateness of the affirmative answer often given can be tested to advantage in studies such as this. The answer, in Haiti, would seem to be that where work at home shields women from the influences of the outer world, this conservatism is found, but where they have an opportunity to come into contact with new trends, no less change enters into their activities than into that of the men. Thus in such matters as the organization of the Haitian household, the cuisine, or the time of meals, the logic of the situation has caused women to preserve Africanisms in full vigor, while historical causes have also similarly aided them in such things as retaining their African role as traders in the markets. In other phases of their lives, however, women, like men, have accepted European patterns, as is evidenced in the field of religion, where no greater resistance has been shown by women toward new forms than by men.

●182 Other examples might be cited, but these indicate how a culture such as that of Haiti, as regards both its inner values and the psychological responses made to them, and its outer form and the manner in which its present-day character was attained, aids in sharpening and clarifying the questions that must be asked and answered if a better grasp of the dynamics of custom and the way in which tradition plays upon the inner being of those who are its carriers is to be had. However, it is not alone in general considerations such as these that the study of Haitian life can be of use. Much that is perplexing in that particular facet of the problem of race which in America is termed the "Negro problem" has both analogy and contrast in Haitian life. It must not be forgotten that the slaves who were brought to continental America were of the same types and of the same background as those imported

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
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into other parts of the New World. Consequently a knowledge of the strains which came to Haiti, of the manner in which they met the situation they found there, and of how the cultural influences that played upon them have worked out in terms of patterns of behavior, should throw light on the way in which American Negroes have met, and are meeting, their own social situation.

Thus the study of Haiti offers contributions of particular value in examining the nature and accuracy of underlying attitudes held toward Negroes by non-Negroes, and the attitudes of Negroes toward themselves. One example is the widespread belief about the quality of the cultures from which the slaves were drawn. This holds that the African peoples who contributed the slave populations to the New World were "savages" whose civilizations were of a lower order than that to which the slaves were introduced. Obviously this view is a natural by-product of European ethnocentrism, but its many repetitions have persuaded the Negroes to accept it completely. Nevertheless, the material in the preceding chapters shows that this concept is anything but valid; that the regions of Africa from which slaves were derived comprise the area where the high cultures of the continent existed, where complex social and political organizations and high forms of religion and art were and are to be found; that their rank, if cultures can be ranked, would rather be with Europe of the Middle Ages than with the most simple societies of nonliterate folk. In addition, investigation into Haitian history has pointed out that of these populations it was not necessarily the deficient who made up the slave cargoes. Despite the widespread acceptance of this notion — among Negroes, again, no less than among whites — it has been seen that a considerable proportion of the slaves were upper-class Africans; that at the very least the slave population represented an adequate cross-section of the societies from which its members were derived.[3]

2: Courlander B-8 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

Vodoun is clearly more than ritual of the cult temple. It is an integrated system of concepts concerning human behavior, the relation of mankind to those who have lived before, and to the natural and supernatural forces of the universe. It relates the living to the dead and to those not yet born. It "explains" unpredictable events by showing them to be consistent with established principles. In short, it is a true religion which attempts to tie the unknown to the known and thus create order where chaos existed before.

As in Dahomey, it is not a system imposed from above but one which pushes out from below. It is bred and nurtured in the family, in the towns, and in the fields. It is common law, with deep roots in an unbroken and continuous past. The priests of Vodoun do not control it and direct its course. They, like the least fortunate peasant, simply move about within it and make use of its resources. They are its servants and its interpreters. In their cult centers, the principles of Vodoun are brought into sharp focus and dramatized. Vodoun is democratic in concept. Any man or woman may have direct contact with the deities or dead ancestors without the intervention of the cult priest. There is no place or situation beyond the influence of the loa or beyond the limits of Vodoun. At every crossroads is the spirit of the crossroads guardian, Legba, and on every long trail is the spirit of the Master of the Highway.

The cult priest nevertheless plays a significant and essential role. He translates beliefs that otherwise might tend to become amorphous into formalized action. He is a teacher, a repository of cult learning, and a vital catalyst. He gives form to abstraction, and practical meaning to symbols. He is the intellectualizing agency of a tremendous emotional force. Through his knowledge of the substance and forms of Vodoun, his experience in dealing with the loa, and in some instances his capacity to set magical forces into action, the cult priest is a dynamic power within his community.

Though the making of *pouins* and *magie* (ritual magic) and *ouangas* (aggressive magic directed against individuals) is within the realm of the cult priest's activities, these things are part of Vodoun only in a subsidiary sense. Magic lurks on the periphery of Vodoun. It has little or no place in the placating of the deities or the dead. It concerns the relationship of the living with each other and with *loa-garos* (*loups-garous*) and *baka* (demons). Although cult rituals include various pouin and magie ceremonies, the cult priest draws upon magic as he draws upon other mystic arts and fields of learning—leaf doctoring, divination, Catholic ritual, and Masonic symbolism. He attempts to bring together all thinking that widens the scope of Vodoun, in order to strengthen his hand to deal with

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1965) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

one. Sometimes a loa who is making life too hard for a devotee will be retired without a replacement. The "washing of the head" must be accompanied by ritual safeguards, and all possible circumstances must be taken into account by the officiating cult priest. There are many stories of people who became mentally deranged as a result of the removal of their loa from their heads.

The mait' tête must also be removed from the head of a person who dies. Should this not be done, the spirit of the deceased will go to reside "below the water" and may cause trouble for the family. This loa is usually transferred to a special jar as a temporary resting place, and later perhaps into the head of another member of the family.

Though the loa is a powerful ruling force in the life of the individual, the human "horse" has controls over his deity too. He may reproach or admonish his loa for bad behavior or for failing to protect him. He may expose the loa's irresponsibility in public through the use of songs in religious rites. And though the loa is frequently encouraged to "enter," steps may be taken to restrain him from possession. This is called *marré loa* —"tying the loa." A woman may "tie" her loa by fixing a hairpin in her hair in a special way. A man may do it by placing his hands in cold water.[3]

Nevertheless, the loa are always lurking in the background. They are a constant and dramatic element in the religious life of the people. They may sometimes be controlled by the houngan, but they are an authority stronger than the priesthood. They give advice, courage, consolation, and status to their followers. They add much to an otherwise hard and ungenerous environment and evoke remembrances of Africa from which the Haitians' ancestors were uprooted. They can also cause concern and anxiety; for the loa are not always benevolent, and they are frequently unpredictable.

Many of the loa are ancient deities, sib-founders and ancestors who loom out of a misty, half-forgotten past. Nananbouclou, Legba, and Ayida Wèdo have been known for many lifetimes in Dahomey. Chango, Ogoun, and Loko were old spirits in Nigeria before the first slave ships sailed from Africa to the New World. Their names and many others in present-day Haiti come from an ancient lore. They recall places, tribes, and old kingdoms from Senegal in northwestern Africa to the heart of the Congo. They are a bond which holds the people of Haiti to Africa. In the mountains people sometimes say, "Haiti is the child of Dahomey," or "Haiti is the child of Guinée." The gods divide their time between their Haitian and their African children.

Yet in some respects the Haitians' concept of their loa is no longer purely African. The African religious patterns have been infiltrated by the lore

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

The yam 244 121 192

itself was transplanted from Africa, where in old times as well as in modern it was a staff of life among those who lived by agriculture. The word "yam" is known throughout large parts of Africa, crossing language lines and forests. It signifies the big root on which the African is so dependent, and it also has the general meaning of "eat." In Senegal it is called *nyami*, while across the width of Africa and in the upper Nile region it is called *nyam*.

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In Haiti the yam is a tie with the past and a symbol of fertility. When the yams are plentiful, there is food for the winter months and a sense of well-being. When the yam crop is poor, there is insecurity and even hunger. Whatever occurs, lurking in the background is the shadow of the family ancestors, for it is they who have the power to enhance the crops or blight them. This is the concept around which the mangé yam is built.

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The annual harvest feast, on the twenty-fifth of November, is rooted in the need for placating the ancestors, so that the dead will insure the fertility of the fields. Before the feast, no yams may be eaten, for the crop must be "baptized" first. Should this rule be violated the yams will spoil and those who eat them will become sick. The precise form of the mangé yam varies from region to region. Sometimes it is held on the premises of the cult chief for the community at large. More traditionally it is held on the family *habitation*, with a houngan in attendance. It is felt that an important obligation rests upon those who have wandered away from the homestead to return for the occasion. For the fate of the family depends to a large degree upon the successful appeal to the vast host of the ancestral dead, and the solidarity of the living in this effort is regarded as vital. Even if one belongs to a Christian sect which proscribes Vodoun, he is obligated and ready to come, for the welfare of the family is paramount. Catholics, Adventists, and Protestants alike participate. As the Haitians say, it is an affair for all who eat yams, and that means all Haitians.

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Yams are washed and prepared for eating during the service. They are cut in small portions, placed in dishes or calabash bowls, and offered to the dead, who have prime rights. All categories of the dead are fed—those who are remembered, those who can be recalled only by name, and those whose names are forgotten. The dead of Haiti are invoked, then the dead of Africa. The marassa dead are fed from separate gourds or bowls, and a special table is set for the ancient dead who move slowly because of their age or infirmities, and who may take a long while to arrive at the mangé. A share of the yams is offered to the family loa. Then the members of the family receive symbolic portions. There is singing, drumming, and dancing, and sometimes ritual baths are taken. Afterward, when the yam feast is ended, the crops may be gathered, stored, and eaten.

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

many non-European characteristics. The manner of work, even down to specific motor activity, has direct and hardly disputable West African connections. Instead of the short-handled West African hoe, the Haitians use a long-handled one, and they work more erect than stooped. But the rhythmic, synchronized use of the hoe, the singing leader and the musicians who stand to one side to "encourage" the workers, the calling of the workers by drum *rappels*, the special consideration for the sick, and the concept of long-term community endeavor are all of West African beginnings. The coumbite is the legitimate descendant of the Dahomean *dokpwe*, the *kurum* of the Mambila (Cameroons), the *ku* of the Kpelle (Liberia), and other West African coöperative systems.

Although the *dokpwe* of Dahomey is a more formal and intricate institution, permeated with certain abstract and ritual concepts, its social and functional characteristics are not greatly different from those of the Haitian coumbite, in which coöperation is marked. Herskovits notes that working with the Dahomean *dokpwe*

> represents recreation rather than labor to the individual member. There is song and dance to drumming and the sound of gongs, on the way and after arrival, and there is feasting and an exhibition of skill. It is an impressive sight to see from forty to a hundred men kneading earth for walls, or laying thatch, or hoeing the earth with unison movements to the accompaniment of conversation and laughter, and the songs of such of their fellows, who, for the moment at rest, have constituted themselves the chorus.

When more than one *dokpwe* is summoned for work on the same project, Herskovits notes,

> there is great rivalry among the organizations to see which one will first complete its allotted task. If only one *dokpwe* is present, there is either individual rivalry, or the *dokpwe* may be divided into two groups which compete one against the other. The food which is provided at these times of collective labor is as rich fare as the owner can afford . . .[8]

An underlying factor in the Dahomean *dokpwe* is awareness of itself as "the manpower of Dahomey," and the members regard themselves as exercising their fundamental privilege as Dahomeans. This attitude toward the coumbite continues to prevail in Haiti. Like the hounfor—but even more significantly in terms of routine, workaday life—the coumbite and the société are an expression of social ties and of the pervading interest in the common welfare.

Certain patterns of the coumbite have been carried over into non-agrarian labor in the towns and cities, wherever group work is required. The carrying of coffee and sugar bags in the warehouses, the loading of ships, and the repairing of roads—all are traditionally performed

[8] [Herskovits, "Some Aspects of Dahomean Ethnology," Africa, Vol. V (July, 1932), pp. 266-296. Cf. p. 352, Category 116. -- Analyst]

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

tempo. The chorus and leader sing responsively, their parts overlapping in traditional African style. The shoulder movements, foot movements, the way the arms are carried, and the typical posture of feet flat on the ground, bent knees, and swayed back—all are of African derivation. These postures and movements are broad and direct. There are few of the decorative and "fine" movements that one sees in the dances of Indonesia, Cambodia, and India. Where the Javanese lays stress on the pose of the hands and the delicate movements of the fingers, the Haitian dancer is concerned with the position of the arms and the motions of the shoulders. The Indonesian sense of poised balance or suspended movement is absent. In its place there is an attitude of strong frontal assault against natural forces such as gravity, or direct submission to those forces. There is almost always a feeling of solidity and stability in Haitian posture, and of a proximity between the body and the earth, but the total effect is dynamic. Indonesian dancing seems to express a comprehension of the unseen and the supernatural; Haitian dancing seems to express an intimate understanding of nature.

Dancing touches on virtually every aspect of life in Haiti. It plays a part in the supplication of loa, the placation of the dead, and the making of magic; in the consecration of a hounfor, the installation of a houngan, and the initiation of cult members; in planting, harvesting, and house-building. Catholic Church holidays, Nine Nights, baptisms, the election of a new president, and ordinary social gatherings—all are celebrated, in part, at least, by dancing.

Haitian dancing is participative rather than exhibitionistic. It is to join rather than to watch. There are some dances, however, which require special skills, and a few which are highly individualistic. Several types of dances are described elsewhere in this book. Verbal description cannot do justice to an art such as dancing, of course; but some brief sketches may help to suggest the differences between one Haitian dance and another.

In the Congo Mazonne, for example, men and women pair off and dance face to face, making contact occasionally but only briefly. The arms are stretched forward as though to embrace the partner around the waist, but the actual embrace never materializes. The partners dance sometimes as though they are unaware of each other and are simply part of a larger group; then they approach, move as mirrored reproductions, and separate. Loin movement is free, and there is a restrained sexual intensity, though direct sexual implications are not necessarily present. Sometimes the woman holds the hem of her skirt in her hands, while the man holds his jacket open toward his partner.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
SV3 Haiti SV3

they even comment upon his unselfish generosity, which seems to have been entirely free of any desire for personal gain. They accuse him rather of taking the easiest course—that of trying to pacify every group in the republic: the masses, by giving them land and removing any external compulsion to work on it; the army, by making their enlistment profitable; the aspiring aristocrats, by validating their titles to estates and not challenging their prestige with a demand for responsibility. Strong states, the critics argue, are built on lines of discipline, not of perpetual yielding.

From an economic point of view a more valid criticism would ask the simple question: what was the practical result of his policies? Under the three previous Negro rulers agriculture had prospered, for these men kept state lands intact and forced the population to work; under Pétion, on the contrary, prosperity steadily declined with the division of land and the removal of compulsion. To expect a body of illiterate, inexperienced ex-slaves automatically to develop such economic virtues as industry, foresight, and thrift in a land which never knew any of these is not realistic, but merely quixotic. The Haitian critic Magloire implies that Pétion was either completely and cynically indifferent to common graft or else naïvely confident that men newly free would somehow be preternaturally honest. He goes into detail:

> Lands were distributed free, without order or method, each person taking what came his way and establishing himself as he could; graft and jobbery, under varied guises, governed the granting of concessions. As for properties in the towns, some people established themselves in upstairs apartments and others in ground-floor ones, without bothering to think of the lawsuits which might result from this disorder. In the sales made by the State, 50 and 100 and 200 gourdes were paid for real estate which was worth 10,000 and 20,000 and 40,000 gourdes or more. The administration put up for sale the property of towns, of communes, and of the State. Even buildings occupied in colonial days by officials, buildings whose construction had cost considerable sums, were bestowed on the people. . . .
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> By a too great fractioning of the national domain, and carried away by the influence of false egalitarian and democratic ideas, Pétion brought about what a modern writer calls "the forcible neglect of agriculture"[32] throughout the Republic.[33]

32. J. N. Léger, *Haïti: son histoire et ses détracteurs* (New York, 1907), p. 162.
33. Auguste Magloire, *L'Erreur révolutionnaire et notre état social* (Port-au-Prince, 1909), pp. 260–263.